

Dear Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations and Education Committees:

My name is Damani Douglas. I am a junior at the CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering and I live in West Hartford, CT. In 2014, I entered CREC AAE as a freshman. Upon starting at my new school, I was immediately struck by the diversity at my current school, which is much greater than what I had previously experienced. Most significantly for me has been the socioeconomic diversity. Before 2014, I didn't know that resources such as home computers and internet access which were largely taken for granted in my local middle school, are not available to many students across the region- many of whom live less than 10 minutes from my home. Seeing the difference between the resources and opportunities that I had assumed were the starting point compared to that of my peers shifted my worldview. It gave me a new appreciation of the fact that, in spite of Connecticut's small size, each of our communities is greatly separated from the next.

I have access to a great education at the CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering, one that is provided to all AAE students regardless of their background. Recently, a group of students and I participated in a mentor program at United Technologies that gave me the opportunity to see how the parts of spacecraft and aircraft are built and the types of processes that go into building and testing them. Back at school, my peers and I were taught the physics and engineering principles necessary to understand this experience. Just last week, I had a chance to visit an Air Force base that is tasked with protecting the eastern seaboard. This base has the capacity to deploy fighter jets within 15 minutes of any threat. Not every student in Connecticut gets the chance to have these experiences- even though they should. At magnet schools, a student is not inhibited by where he or she lives or how much money his or her family has. This is unique and it is special.

At the CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering, I have friends who are different from me in many ways- because of where they live or the color of their skin or of the languages that they speak at home. They are different because of their political ideologies and religious beliefs. Our school brings us together in ways that would never happen otherwise. We see each other every day and learn in the same space. I've had the experience of playing on a soccer team with teammates who are fasting while others grab mid-practice snacks. The fasting students can't even stop for water breaks. Some of us take the city bus to weekend practices, others drive their own cars, others, like me, get dropped off by our parents. But for two hours, the playing field is level. My team comes together to form something that is greater than our individual contributions. Every student on that team has a family regardless of what happens at home. For two hours, students from all over the the state come together on the practice field to represent the future of Connecticut.

Students who are exposed to more diversity in schools are better equipped to work with the diverse group of people that they will encounter in the future. I ask that you continue to support students, who are like me and students and are unlike me, so that we can continue to have opportunities to to come together and learn in meaningful ways.